



Why the Difference? An Attempt to Account for the Variations in the Phonetic Development of Place-Names in Old Norse bólstaðr in the Hebrides

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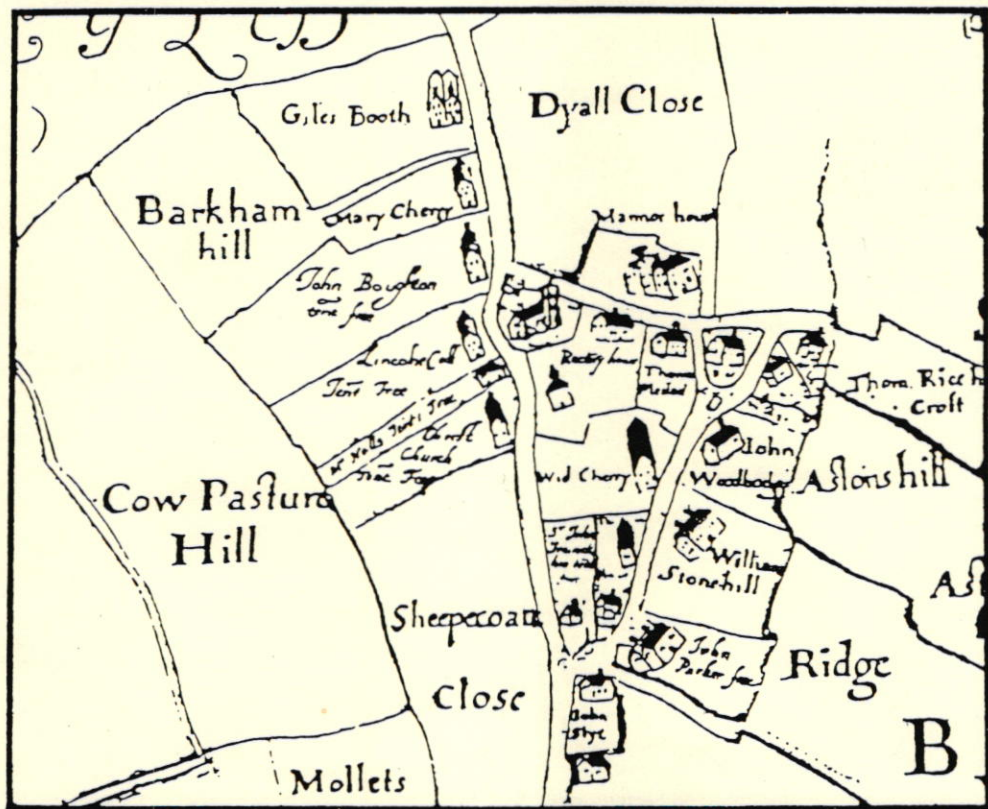
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Why the Difference?
An Attempt to Account for the Variations
in the Phonetic Development of Place-Names
in Old Norse *bólstaðr* in the Hebrides

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The study of place-names of Scandinavian origin in Scotland is an enticing and interesting pursuit. Unfortunately, not many dare venture into this speciality of Scottish onomastic research, mainly because of the languages through which place-names of Scandinavian origin have been transmitted. In the Northern Isles place-names have passed directly from Norse via Norn into English/Lowland Scots. The same is generally true for Caithness and Sutherland, although a fair amount of transmission through Gaelic is also visible there. In the Western Isles and the adjacent mainland, Scandinavian place-names have passed from Norse into Gaelic and subsequently from Gaelic into English, although Gaelic remains the dominant language in many areas. Needless to say, the complexity of the linguistic situation has caused great regional differences—of all of which the researcher must be aware before entering into the interpretative phase. The written sources, one of the most valuable tools for the place-name researcher, are not of the greatest help. Abundant and reliable written sources are rarely available from much earlier than the sixteenth century. This means that the written sources do not offer an easy bypass to the problems and complexities visible in the place-name material today. That said, the written sources are, nonetheless, pivotal to the discipline, as they, combined with the added information of pronunciation, offer the most reliable and sound foundation for the interpretation and analysis of the individual place-names of Scandinavian origin.

In its country of origin, Norway, the habitative place-name element Old Norse (ON) *bólstaðr*, m., 'a (secondary) farm' has previously only been awarded very limited scientific attention. In Scotland, however, it has been the subject of a great deal more research, as it is one of the best indicators of Scandinavian onomastic influence there. Professor W. F. H. Nicolaisen has in particular utilised this place-name element to determine the extent

and chronology of Scandinavian settlement in Scotland,¹ and more recently, Richard Cox has also investigated this place-name type and re-evaluated some earlier suppositions.² The aim of these surveys has been to attain a general overview of this place-name element, but no detailed study has ever been carried out.

So in the folly of my youth and with the desire to take on the whole material, I began on a PhD project, which set out to collect all known place-names containing ON *bólstaðr* and to gather as much information about this place-name type as possible (see fig. 1).³ In connection with my research, I have come across one point that has so far not been satisfactorily explained by anyone, including myself. Regrettably, my knowledge of Gaelic is only very limited and I am, therefore, perhaps not the most qualified person to discuss a problem involving this language. But I feel that the point in question is of such a character that attention needs to be drawn to it. It is my hope that this article will help to stimulate renewed debate and that people better acquainted with Gaelic than myself will also take up the challenge of this problem and help to explore the wider implications of its possible explanation.

The problem in question concerns the development of the medial consonant cluster [-lst-] in *bólstaðr* from Old Norse into Gaelic. When *bólstaðr* forms the second part of a compound, this triconsonantal cluster seemingly develops along two different lines in the Hebrides, either from ON [-lst-] > Gael. [-st] or from ON [-lst-] > Gael. [-ls(-)] > [-s(-)]. There is nothing problematic as such about this reduction itself. In fact, it

¹ W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 'Norse settlement in the Northern and Western Isles: some place-name evidence', *Scottish Historical Review*, 48 (1969), 6-19; *idem*, *Scottish Place-Names* (London, 1976), pp. 84-120; *idem*, 'Early Scandinavian naming in the Western and Northern Isles', *Northern Scotland*, 3 (1979-80), 105-21; *idem*, 'The Viking settlement of Scotland: evidence of place-names', in *The Vikings*, edited by R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), pp. 95-115.

² R. Cox, 'Descendants of Norse *bólstaðr*?: a re-examination of the lineage of *Bost & Co.*', in *Peoples and Settlement in North-West Ross*, edited by J. R. Baldwin (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 43-67.

³ P. Gammeltoft, 'The Place-Name Element Old Norse *bólstaðr*. An Interdisciplinary Study of the Development of, and Change in, Place-Names which Contain the Generic *-bólstaðr*, from their Origin in Norway to their Dissemination to the North Atlantic and Elsewhere' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Århus, Denmark, 1999).

is quite normal for clusters of three consonants to be reduced to two consonants or even a single one. Normally, one would expect the medial consonant to be dropped, apart from cases such as the present one where the phonetically most 'powerful' consonant [s] occupies the medial position. The problem rather concerns why there is a difference in development within the area of Gaelic speech. Similar developments to the above have also taken place in the simplex form but since this is in no way conflicts with what would be expected, I have decided only to describe the numerically more significant compounded examples.

The former development ON [-lst-] > Gael. [-st] is prevalent in the Outer Hebrides, Skye, Coll, Tiree and probably also Mull, and has resulted in the modern reflex *-bost*, as in the names: Habost (NB 522 632), Horgabost (NG 048 965) and Arnabost (NM 209 600), from Lewis, Harris and Coll, respectively. A late development to [-s] is marginally evidenced in the southern extremity of the area of distribution. On the island of Ulva near Mull, the settlement of Abos (NM 408 415), is recorded as: *Abos* 1630 (Retours (Arg., 36)); *Abose* 1683 (Retours (Arg., 86)); *Abost* 1751 (Valuation Roll); *Abbost* 1771 (Notice of Sale); *Abos* 1832 (Private Census).⁴ This particular

⁴ The source abbreviations used in this article are as follows: ALI = *Acts of the Lords of the Isles 1336-1408*, edited by J. Munro and R. W. Munro (Edinburgh, 1986); BK = *Registrum prædiorum et reddituum ad ecclesias diocesis Bergensis saeculo p. C. XIV to pertinentium vulgo dictum "Bergens Kalvskind" (Björgyniar Kalfskinn)*, edited by P. A. Munch (Kristiania, 1843); Blaeu = J. Blaeu, 'Scotia Regnum', 'Ila Insula', vol. v, in *Atlas Major*, 12 vols (Amsterdam, 1662); DN = *Diplomatarium Norvegicum: Oldbreve til kundskap om Norges indre og ytre forhold, sprog, slegter, seder, lovgivning og rettergang i middelalderen*, edited by C. C. A. Lange, C. R. Unger and H. J. Huitfeldt-Kaas et al. (Kristiania, 1847-), vol. 1-; McDougall = S. McDougall, *Map of the Island of Islay, Surveyed 1749-51 (1751)* in SRO; NG = O. Rygh, *Norske gaardnavne*, 19 vols (Kristiania/Oslo, 1897-1936); NRJ = H. J. Huitfeldt-Kaas, *Norske Regnskaber og Jordebøger fra det 16de Aarhundrede (1514-21)* (Kristiania, 1887-1901); OPS = *Origines Parochiales Scotiae*, published by the Bannatyne Club, 2 parts, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1855); Orkneyinga Saga = *Orkneyinga saga*, edited by S. Nordal (Reykjavík, 1913-16); RAO = Riksarkivet, Oslo; Retours = *Inquisitionum ad Capellam Domini Regis Retornatarum quae in publicis archivis Scotiae adhuc servantur. Abbreviato. Printed by command of his majesty King George III*, 3 vols (1811-16); RMS = *Register of the Great Seal: Registrum Magni*

development is, however, so late that it is not of any great relevance to this discussion, so no further reference will be made to it. The latter development ON [-lst-] > Gael. [-ls(-)] > [-s(-)] seems to be confined to Islay and probably also the southern extremity of Mull. This development is reflected in modern reflexes such as *-bols* and *-bus*, as in for example *Grobols* (NR 337 598) and *Carabus* (NR 314 639).

As stated above, there is no formal reason why original [-lst-] should not have been reduced in this position in a compound. Instead, the core of the matter lies in why and how ON *bólstaðr* developed in such distinct ways? In the following I will try to attempt an outline of possibilities.

The development *-bólstaðr* > *-bost* [-böst]

All compounds of Scandinavian origin generally retain the same stress pattern in Gaelic as in Old Norse with the main stress on the first element and secondary stress on the second element.⁵ There are forty-two examples with the reflex [-böst] scattered throughout the northern part of the Hebrides. As the second element in a compound, original *bólstaðr* may have developed in the following way: The final element [ð(-)] was lost early because of its final, unstressed position. Being only weakly stressed, the stem vowel [o:] has been reduced in quantity as well as quality to [ɔ]. It is not certain when this occurred but the change seems to have been effected relatively early, at least compared with Norway, where the phonetic evidence shows that the quantitative reduction in *bólstaðr* compounds in most cases did not take place earlier than the fourteenth century.⁶ Around the same time, the lateral [l] in the cluster [-lst(-)] was also dropped, either owing to its situation in a triconsonantal

Sigilli Regnum Scotorum, edited by J. M. Thomson *et al.* (Edinburgh, 1882–1914); RSS = *Register of the Privy Seal: Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regnum Scotorum*, edited by M. Livingstone *et al.* (Edinburgh, 1908–), vol. 1–; SRO = Scottish Record Office, HM General Register House Edinburgh EH1 3YY, Scotland, UK; van Keulen = G. van Keulen, *Nieuwe paskaart van de West Kust van Schotland...* (c.1734), SRO.

⁵ Cox, 'Descendants of Norse *bólstaðr*?', p. 50.

⁶ Gammeltoft, 'The Place-Name Element Old Norse *bólstaðr*', pp. 106–08. Cf. also D. A. Seip, *Norsk Språkhistorie* (Oslo, 1955), p. 112; and V. Skard, *Norsk Språkhistorie*, vol. I (Oslo, 1967), 143.

cluster, or to being placed before a velar consonant.⁷ Last in the series of changes was probably the loss of the [-a-] of the final syllable. This development may date to the fifteenth century, as a possible vestige of this vowel, -e, is present in the early source form *Husaboste* from 1389 (ALI (p. 13, no. 10)),⁸ but not in the form *Froybost* from 1498 (RMS (II, 2437)).⁹ By the sixteenth century there is no vestige of this vowel or a second syllable in the written sources and the reflex seems to have attained roughly the same expression as today.

I realise that this model of development is somewhat vague and diffuse.¹⁰ The reason for this is primarily that it is not known exactly how and when these changes occurred, or to which stage Old Norse had progressed in the Hebrides when the general gaelicisation began to take effect there. The date of gaelicisation has never really been investigated to any great extent. To my knowledge, only the Norwegian scholar Magne Oftedal has ever attempted such a study. Through his research into the use of the Old Norse appellative *steinn*, m., 'a standing stone' in place-names, he has been able to show that a great number of place-names of Scandinavian origin did not become gaelicised until relatively late, i.e. at about 1000 AD or later.¹¹ Only a few place-names investigated by Oftedal appeared to have been borrowed at an earlier stage of Norse settlement in the Outer Hebrides and Skye. Taking Oftedal's findings into account, it is possible that some phonetic differences evident in words of the same origin could indicate when place-names of Scandinavian origin became gaelicised.

With regard to the consonant cluster [-lst-], the lateral certainly seems to have been lost at least a century and a half earlier in the northern Hebrides than in Norway. The implication of this is that the loss of [l] may well be an independent Gaelic feature, perhaps a step taken to reduce a long consonant cluster of the type which Gaelic generally seems to avoid. It might also be possible, however, that this reduction had already been

⁷ Seip, *Norsk Språkhistorie*, p. 76.

⁸ *Husabost* (NF 77 62), North Uist, now lost.

⁹ *Frobost* (NF 740 253), South Uist.

¹⁰ For an alternative model of development, however, see Cox, 'Descendants of Norse *bólstaðr*?', p. 50.

¹¹ M. Oftedal, 'Norse *steinn* in Hebridean place-names', *Fróðskaparrit. Annales Societatis Scientiarum Færoensis*, 13 (1964), 225-34.

under way in Old Norse in the Hebrides before the take-over of Gaelic. Certainly, in some dialects in Norway there was a tendency to drop [l] before velar and labial consonants as early as 1050–1150.¹² A development similar to the northern Hebridean one has also taken place in the Northern Isles, Caithness and Sutherland, best illustrated by Scrabster in Thurso, Caithness, which is recorded as: *á Skarabólstað* c.1200 (Orkneyinga Saga (ch. 480)); *Scrabustar* 1527 (RSS (I, 3650)); *Skrabstar* 1586 (RMS (V, 1088)). It could well be significant that the development of the triconsonantal cluster [-lst-] in Norwegian, Gaelic and Lowland Scots is seemingly parallel, although it must be pointed out, however, that the loss of [l] does not necessarily reflect the same development but may have been caused by completely unrelated factors.

The relative similarity of the North Hebridean pronunciation with many Norwegian counterparts certainly appears to be coincidental when comparing the progression of development evident in the Norwegian sources with those of the Hebrides. Note for instance how the source forms of Myklebust, Ålfoten sogn, Sogn og Fjordane fylke in Western Norway: *i mykla Boolstadum* 1348 (DN (RAO, IV 269)); *i Myklabolstað* c.1360 (BK (RAO, 17a)); *Møglebostad* c.1521 (NRJ (RAO, II 125)); *Møchelbust* 1723 (RAO) differ from the source forms of, for example, Husabost and Frobost (see fig. 2). This comparison clearly shows that the corresponding Norwegian developments took place at a much later date. This temporal discrepancy in the loss of *l* between Norway and the Northern Hebrides could signify that the developments are unrelated. However, the loss of *l* in *bólstaðr* in the Northern Hebrides may possibly have taken place earlier there because of its transition into Gaelic solely through place-names and not also as an independent appellative.

The development *-bólstaðr* > *-bols* [-bʌsəʏ] / *-bus* [-bʌs]

There are twenty-seven names in *-bols* [-bʌsəʏ] / *-bus* [-bʌs] in Islay. Compared with the development to [-bʊst] attested elsewhere in the Hebrides, it may be difficult to see that these reflexes should represent the same place-name element. Therefore, Richard Cox has suggested an alternative derivation for the Islay examples, namely one in **bólshagi*. It is outside the scope of this article to account for this derivation, and I

¹² Seip, *Norsk Språkhistorie*, p. 76.

will say no more than that I find this suggestion unlikely, mostly for the reason that the compound is otherwise unattested. Furthermore, from the typological point of view, **bólshagi* would represent an instance of innovation in naming which is completely unknown in Scottish place-names of Scandinavian origin.¹³ The core of the problem is that it is not known whether the development from ON [-lst-] to Gael. [-ls(-)] is possible or not, as there are no parallels in Scandinavian loans into Gaelic against which to check the Islay development. The Gaelic of the Hebrides is far from a uniform language but rather a series of distinctive dialects, each with their special features and influences. In Islay and Mull there is some marginal and late evidence for a resistance to the combination [-st(-)] in place-names of Scandinavian origin.¹⁴ This is evidenced for example in the *staðir* place-name Erasaid in Kilchoman, Islay, which is first recorded as *Herrestuid* in a document of 1562 (OPS, p. 274). Hence, it is not inconceivable that [-lst-] could have developed into [-ls-] in this part of the Hebrides.¹⁵

For these reasons I have chosen to see the present reflexes *-bolls* [-basəy] / *-bus* [-bas] as being derived from ON *bólstaðr*. The difference in pronunciation of these reflexes is determined by the overall structure of the individual name. All Hebridean place-names of Scandinavian origin have today almost invariably been reduced to a maximum of three syllables.¹⁶ This means that if the first part of a place-name compound consists of one syllable only, then the second part is disyllabic, in this case [-basəy]. If, on the other hand, the first part is disyllabic, then the second part will have to be monosyllabic, as with the reflex [-bas]. But as the source forms in fig. 2 as well as below will show, the latter

¹³ Cf. e.g. W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 'Imitation and innovation in the Scandinavian place-names of the Northern Isles of Scotland', *Nomina*, 11 (1988), 75-85.

¹⁴ Cf. Capt. F. W. L. Thomas, 'On Islay place-names', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 16 (1881-82), 241-76 (p. 242): 'There is usually much abbreviation of the generic terms in the last two centuries, particularly such as have ceased to have meaning in common speech, and in a few cases they are altogether suppressed. Thus *staðr*, in the sixteenth century becomes "sta" and "say", but it is now vaguely represented by "s"....'

¹⁵ D. MacAulay, 'The Scottish Gaelic language', in *The Celtic Languages*, edited by D. MacAulay (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 137-248 (p. 151).

¹⁶ Cox, 'Descendants of Norse *bólstaðr*?', p. 59.

reduction is a fairly recent phenomenon. Original [o:] initially seems to have undergone a similar reduction to [ɔ] as in the North Hebrides, the reason being that the majority of the oldest source forms feature an *o* for the stem vowel. An example of this may be the 1588 reference to Nerabus in Kilchoman, which is recorded as *Nerrabollsadh* (1588 RMS (V, 1491)). Therefore, the present vowel quality [ʌ] seems to be a late development, possibly a post sixteenth-century one, although source forms with *u* instead of *o* appear sporadically already in the earliest records. This is seen for instance in the case of Cornabus in the parish of Kildalton & Oa, Islay, which appears as: *Cornubus* 1408 (ALI (p. 22, no. 16)); *Cornobolsay* 1562 (OPS (p. 271)); *Cornepollis* 1614 (RMS (VII, 1137)); *Cornepollis* 1627 (RMS (VIII, 1146)), *Cornepolis* 1662 (Retours (Arg., 68)); etc. Here the *u* is present only in the earliest (and most radical) source form. However, since all the remaining source forms feature an *o*, the *u* of the 1408 reference cannot be taken to indicate an [ʌ] sound any more than one in [ɔ], especially not if it, as might be the case, is the result of a later transcription modernisation.¹⁷

The final *-dhh* in the 1588 form of Nerabus may probably not be seen as evidence of the retention of the final element [ð(-)], the reason being that contemporary source forms show no such remnant. Compare for example the source forms for Eorabus in the parish of Kilarow & Kilmeny (*Eurobolsay* 1562 OPS (p. 266); *Ewrabolse* 1584 (RSS (VIII, 1743)). Instead, the *-dhh* most likely represents an attempt to render an epenthetic [ɣ], here used to close an otherwise open syllable.¹⁸ As in the rest of the Hebrides, [ð(-)] must have been lost early because of its final, unstressed position. The immediately preceding vowel [a] is still retained in the form [ə] in some examples but has relatively recently been subject to loss if the specific element is disyllabic.

This only leaves us to have a look at the original consonant cluster [-lst-], which early on became [-ls-] and more recently simply [-s(-)]. As explained earlier, no definite explanation can be given for this particular development, other than that triconsonantal clusters in loans are often

¹⁷ Cf. J. Cameron, *Celtic Law. The 'Senchus Mór' and 'The Book of Aicill', and the Traces of an Early Gaelic System of Law in Scotland* (London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1937), pp. 212–19.

¹⁸ Cox, 'Descendants of Norse *bólstaðr*?', p. 59.

reduced in Gaelic. This is evident for example in the word *sràbh*, which derives from English 'straw', and in the early loan into Gaelic, *sràid*, 'a street, row', which is ultimately from Latin *strata*.¹⁹ If the reason behind the reduction of [-lst-] > [-ls-] is obscure, the result is, nonetheless, more obvious. When [t] was dropped from the cluster, the lateral was relieved of some of the pressure of being a 'weak' constituent in a consonant cluster and was retained until perhaps the seventeenth century. This retention is still evident in the orthographic representation of, for example, Robolls [rɔ̌bʌsəy] in the parish of Kilarow & Kilmeny.

Although it cannot be established with absolute certainty that the southern Hebridean examples are of the same origin as *-bost* [-bɔst] in the northern Hebrides, I think it would be futile to argue for any other derivation. If this is true, what is the reason for this difference in development? As I see it, the developments could be independent dialectal responses to a non-Gaelic consonant cluster. The developments would thus signify a Hebridean north-south dialectal distinction.²⁰ Alternatively, it might be argued that the developments reflect a difference of chronology in the process of gaelicisation in the Hebrides. For this possibility to work, however, the lateral has to show signs of susceptibility to loss in Old Norse. In Norway, this loss is not evident in the *bólstaðr* material much earlier than 1500, although the tendency to drop [l] before labial and velar consonants is visible in some Norwegian dialects as early as 1050–1150.²¹ And considering that a comparable reduction has taken place in the Northern Isles and Caithness, the possibility that this tendency went into effect earlier in Scotland than in Norway might be present. If this is the case, then the development [-lst-] > [-st-] would signify a relatively late date for the gaelicisation, such as for example the eleventh or the twelfth century, whereas the development [-lst-] > [-ls-] could indicate that the process of gaelicisation occurred prior to this date.

It is possible that the idea sketched out above does not hold water when examined more closely. In my *bólstaðr* material, however, there are

¹⁹ M. MacIannan, *Gaelic Dictionary. Gaelic—English, English—Gaelic* (Edinburgh, 1925 (reprinted 1995)), pp. 316–17.

²⁰ MacAulay, 'The Scottish Gaelic language', pp. 150–51.

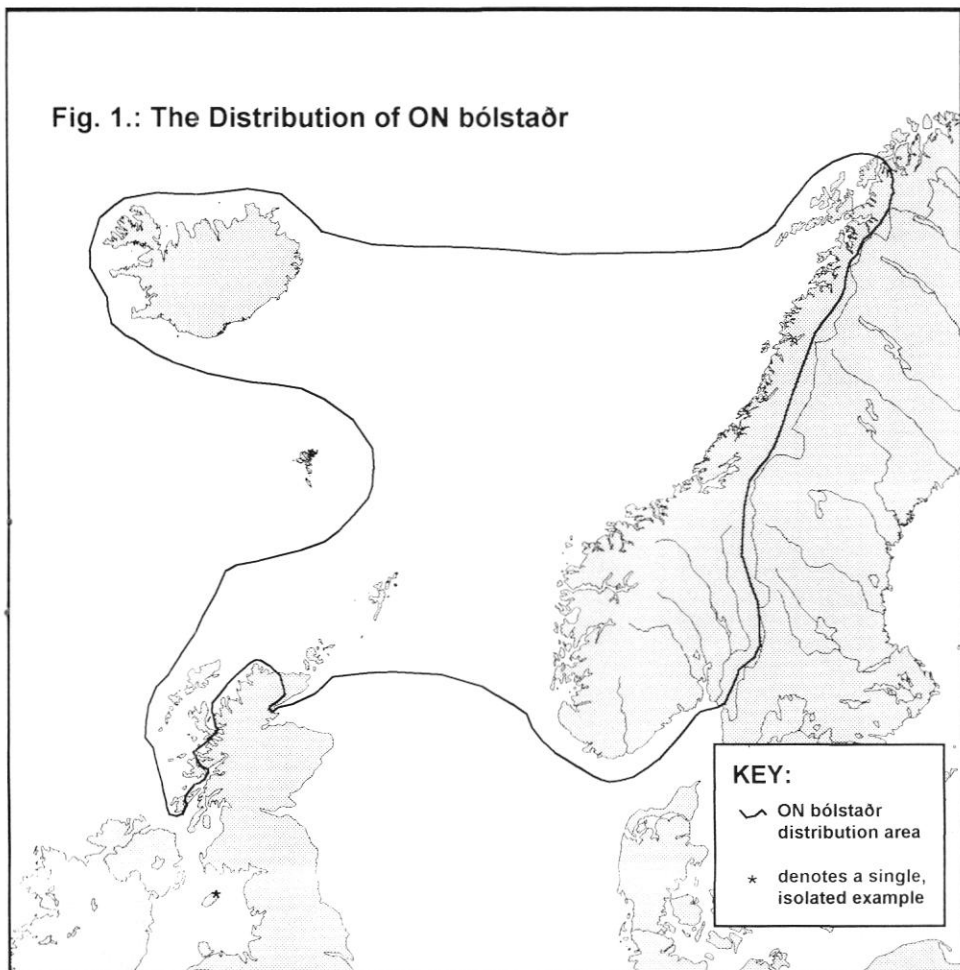
²¹ Seip, *Norsk Språkhistorie*, p. 76.

some additional indications that might be interpreted as supporting the above proposition. Firstly, it is remarkable how absent Gaelic influence seems to be from the specific inventory of this place-name element. There is only one place-name in *bólstaðr* which might possibly contain a Gaelic word, namely *Persabus* in the parish of Kilarow & Kilmeny, Islay (*Persabolls* 1751 McDougall), of which the formally most suitable interpretation of the specific is Gaelic *pearsa*, n. f., 'a person, parson(?)' (< Lat. *persona*). Secondly, the Islay *bólstaðr* material completely lacks stereotypical place-names in *Kirkjubólstaðr* and *Breiðabólstaðr*, so commonly found in the Northern Isles and in the rest of the Hebrides (see fig. 3). This seems to imply that the pattern of naming for *bólstaðr* in Islay, if not halted early on, certainly took a different direction than elsewhere in Scotland. Furthermore, it seems that a phonetic change, which Oftedal takes to be proof of an early borrowing into Gaelic, is visible in one of the Islay place-names of this type. The place-name *Lyrabus* in the parish of Kilarow & Kilmeny (*Lyrebols* 1662 (Blaeu (121–23)); *Lyrebols* 1734 c. (van Keulen); *Lynabolls* 1751 (McDougall)) most likely contains ON *leirr*, m., 'clay, mud'. The expected vowel quality for this derivation is [e:], but would according to Oftedal alternatively be [y:] if gaelicised prior to c.1000 AD.²² I have, unfortunately no pronunciation for this name, but for as much as the source forms can show, the vowel quality [y:] seems plausible.

Without committing myself to any definite viewpoint on this matter, I think there might be some scope for considering that the southern Hebrides could have been gaelicised earlier than the northern Hebrides. My personal knowledge of Gaelic is, unfortunately, much too sparse for me to be able to say anything with certainty. I also realise that the web I have spun is supported by very thin threads indeed—perhaps none at all. The core of the problem lies, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, in the question: is the development ON [-lst-] > Gael. [-ls-] possible? If the answer to this is yes, what does it signify? Is it a purely dialectal feature particular to Gaelic, or does it bear testament to when the process of gaelicisation took place?

²² Oftedal, 'Norse *steinn* in Hebridean place-names', 225–34.

Fig. 1.: The Distribution of ON bólsaðr



	Norway	Northern Hebrides	Southern Hebrides	
14 th c.	<i>i Myklabolstað</i>	<i>Husaboste</i>		
15 th c.		<i>Froybost</i>		<i>Cornubus</i> (?)
16 th c.	<i>Moglebostad</i>	<i>Frobost</i>	<i>Nerrabollsadhh</i>	<i>Cornobolsay</i>
17 th c.			<i>Nerrabolsadh</i>	<i>Cornepollis</i>
18 th c.	<i>Møchelbust</i>		<i>Nerabolls</i>	
Present form	<i>Myklebust</i>	† <i>Husabost & Frobost</i>	<i>Nerabus</i>	<i>Cornabus</i>

Fig. 2. The comparative development of ON *bólstaðr* in Norway and in the different parts of the Hebrides.

**Fig. 3.: The Distribution of Place-Names in
*Breiðabólstaðr and *Kirkjubólstaðr**



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